

EAST PROVIDENCE SCHOOL DEPARTMENT

School Committee Meeting

East Providence High School – Auditorium

2000 Pawtucket Avenue

East Providence, Rhode Island 02914

April 9, 2007

Open Session

The meeting was called to order at 7:00PM. All School Committee members were present: Robert Faria, Eileen Lovett, David Medeiros, Steven Santos, Mildred Morris. Also present: Dr. Jacqueline B. Forbes, Superintendent of Schools and Andrew Thomas, Esq.

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag was observed and the National Anthem was performed by a student.

Report of the Superintendent & Staff

Dr. Forbes explained the options available regarding the current financial crisis during the FY 2007-2008 School Budget via PowerPoint presentation.

Mr. Medeiros said he will not vote to close Riverside Middle School. Mrs. Lovett explained the ground rules for public comment. Mr.

Santos said this was the first opportunity he had to review this document containing the options and he had not been made aware of the April 25th meeting and felt there should be better communication. He said he was tired of the money coming from the taxpayers.

Public Comments:

Dr. Ramos said he wanted to see the proposals first, but he is not going to allow Riverside Middle School to be closed. He realizes we have a problem, but it cannot be solved on the backs of the children.

Antone Gouveia, Riverside, said the School Committee has a tremendous decision to make, but needs to map out and plan the destination by charting and answering questions to clarify where we are at. About one month ago the deficit was projected to be \$2,750,000. He did not agree with figures for salaries and projected pension costs; he asked where did the additional \$270,000 come from. Mr. Gouveia did not agree with the projected increase for next year on special education.

Dr. Forbes reported that last year, the B& E Consulting report suggested funding special education at 100%.

Mr. Gouveia said three proposals will change the entire school community and firm numbers need to be obtained. He questioned the debt reduction (49% of the high school boiler project will be paid by

the state). Surplus funds from the sale of property should be shared by the City Council as they are part of the same community. Mr. Gouveia would like to sit with the Finance Committee and Dr. Forbes regarding some of the budget numbers. He felt that one of the proposals for the merger of Riverside and Martin Middle Schools is absurd.

Jessica, a seventh grade student at Riverside Middle School, related that a reduction in extra curricula activities, will cause more distractions, health problems and busing problems, especially with after school sibling care.

Carol Calder, 35 Lottie Drive, was very pleased to hear that the School Committee was in favor of keeping schools open and hopes to keep a positive attitude; she asked if two administrators could be hired at a lower salary.

Dr. Forbes advised that when we hire, others may come in at a lower step; the School Committee is elected to put children first and people are trusting them; decisions to be made will effect children for the rest of their lives and we need to find the money to keep all schools open.

A student at RMS said it was not a good reason to combine middle schools because of sports and band.

Speaker: Questioned how the projections in the district's student enrollment could be declining with all the condos and the building in the city.

Dr. Forbes said the School Department is aware of the projects before the planning board; however, the NESDEC projections are based on live births.

Speaker: Suggested that the numbers of salaries could possibly be the reason we are in deficit and suggested that be looked at first before we warehouse the kids.

Joe Larisa, Don Avenue, last year offered to represent the City in the buyback litigation without a fee, but the new City Council and three members of the School decided not to pursue the issue. He said he is a Viking himself and if the School Committee votes to close Riverside Middle School, he will be in court on April 26th to reopen it. Everyone should be working together. Last year all agreed to solve the deficit and to end buybacks; also none of the collective bargaining units have co-pay; if the School Department did, it would save ½ million dollars. The School Department should be paying the same as the fire and police departments. The School Committee voted to undo the buyback agreement. There is a solution to the budget problem and the School Committee can do the right thing to reinstitute the lawsuit regarding the buyback; three voted against it.

Mrs. Saunders, Rumford, mentioned that the student teacher ratio has not been addressed and that Martin Middle School has good teachers too. (Dr. Forbes said the staff will move with the students) Mrs. Saunders was concerned that she has a four year old with an IEP with speech problems and could not register her daughter for school. She felt that everyone needs to think about what will happen to the kids.

Kathy Blackmar – The Leonardo project projects 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ kids which is a ridiculous number. The Grove Avenue building is leased at \$50,000; does it pay taxes and upkeep? Proposal A calls for 1268 kids into Martin Middle School to save 37,000; she asked if it was worth having kids out on the street when kids will not be allowed to play sports or participate in band when the two schools are merged. She asked about closing the administration building and if that would include Riverside Middle School? She spoke to Mr. Rodericks and asked for attendance numbers which indicate that every class is filled in every school; if all classes are full, where will we put the kids?

Debbie Cook – Moving 28 people to Riverside; why not move 28 people to Martin Middle School as it would be a lot easier. She works at the State House in Sen. Moura's office and asked how many people will be going to the State House again to testify on bills to be heard this week.

Mr. Martin stated that we are here for the kids, but the School Committee does not pay health care and everyone gets free medical

Speaker – Asked that everyone please respect the children and thanked the School Committee and City Council for getting back to her. Commented that none of the slides focused on the educational benefits of a merger of the schools, only on the financial aspects. She hopes not to go through this again next year.

Dr. Forbes advised that we need to be able to provide resources to pay to run schools without a deficit.

Paul Licata, Silver Spring Avenue has a son at Riverside Middle School and believes that Silver Spring is deeded land and cannot be sold. His son was relocated to Riverside last year due to a relocation of streets, now this would disrupt his education again and send him back to Martin. Kids get attached and his son moved to a school he didn't want to go to. He asked to find other he and for people to give up insurance; he pays co-pay and \$63 week insurance

Tom Riley, Pawtucket Avenue, said this is all negligence on repairs and infrastructure; the School budget has gone to a 90/10 split, which is not acceptable. He looked through budget items: jeep to plow sidewalk - replace fenders for a 27,000 savings; refurbish the panel trucks for a savings of \$120,000 and use the tech school services. In reference to the memorandum of agreement with the City Council regarding the buyback, three School Committee members should be ashamed as they have insulted the taxpayers of East Providence. The

buyback dollars could go to the schools. They dangle the kids out in front of an Amtrak: close the schools and then not, which is posturing. Knock off the adult entitlements (73%) and get the money back to kids.

Bill Murphy, Wetmore Avenue – believes options obscure the real story; we are spending too much and where is the money going to. Waited too long; problems way before rumors. There has been a lack of vigilance by the people; six figure salaries for administrators with raises, benefits, etc. Families paying taxes have less. How can we tell families who are supporting all benefits, which are obscene by the world they work in? Who is the School Committee representing in contract negotiations? People have been paying out deals cut in the back room. There are a lot of other options like co-pay; taxpayer's resources are at a minimum and he asked that be respected. Why did the School Committee not honor the agreement made by the City Council and School Committee that could have saved significant dollars. He asked all citizens to continue to pay attention and to go to meetings. Mr. Murphy commented this is an establishment feeding itself.

Mr. Faria said he and Mr. Medeiros looked at the financial impact; he ran for office in the first place because Kent Heights had issues along with Martin; no one looked three years down the line. Last November, he was asked about negotiations; we have to bite the bullet and take a stand.

Speaker: 7th grade student at Martin Middle School said there will be too many kids on sports teams.

Speaker: Riverside Middle School 6th grader has about 1500 signatures against closing the school; there will be a problem with the activities of two schools being combined.

Speaker: 5th grade student at Martin Middle School said Martin is a great school and disputed some of the complaints others have made. Martin has good teachers and administrators, it will be overcrowded if the two schools are combined.

Mr. Abrams was disappointed about the School Committee vote on not pursuing the buyback; that money could have been spent on kids. He acknowledged the Superintendent for all her work but asked if we will still be in deficit under all the different scenarios.

Dr. Forbes said there needed to be more than one proposal, but we need to see what the School Committee decides.

Mr. Abrams said we have to live within the 3.5% cap; the Superintendent is making an effort to cut back; his issue is he has never seen the City face the same scrutiny as the School Department. Over and over again, we need freezes and cutbacks. The current tax rate is enough; the city should also come up to the plate to save

money. The Bacon & Edge report showed over the last ten years, a disproportionate amount of money was allocated to the schools. The city wasted over \$23 million which could have been spent on kids. He hopes the City Manager and finance department takes the message and makes everything work.

Patricia Buteau, One Fern Drive, has three kids at Francis; she is a teacher in Pawtucket and felt that many teachers in RI are realizing that money to the classroom is getting less and less and how other systems are getting co-shares. Need to consider looking at this for some additional money, at city surplus dollars, anything that involves closing schools should be last. Hoping that on April 25th, all are looked at; schools in EP are excellent, moderately and high performing and need to continue that way.

Speaker: Did not support closing any schools; asked about money for Kent Heights and why not Silver Spring; if in need of revenue, what about jobs at Trifari for tax relief. Put a speed trap on Vets Parkway to Warren Avenue to raise extra revenue; increase lunch prices; look at options in administrative pay, co-pay benefits. The numbers do not add up; do away with cushy jobs; teachers have two and one half months off and need to pay insurance. He will not forget the faces of School Committee who do not have kids; it is political suicide to close schools.

Tracy has three kids at Silver Spring; one at Riverside Middle School

next year and is vehemently opposed to closing Silver Spring and Riverside Middle School. It is difficult for parents of EP kids more than the School Committee. She asked why there are not other methods to save money besides closing schools. She took exception with shushing Mr. Larisa; this is exactly what everyone is here for to discuss buybacks; there should have been proposals to cut expenses and closing buildings should be last option. She has to live within a budget at work; her insurance is far from free and free healthcare is unjust. Expects as a taxpayer that a back up plan be found.

Speaker: Silver Spring parent disgusted with closing Silver Spring for kids.

Clair Sarganis, an educator and her husband a life long educator, have invested money in their education in order to teach and need to complete graduate credits every five years as a requirement. She spends money on her students every year when she hears talk about teachers being paid, what about what teachers spend to teach students the best they can. She asked that everyone look around the room and if this many people show up at the State House to fund mandates, which keep getting passed down to the local taxpayers, things might change. She encouraged all to take the fight further.

Speaker: Teacher agrees with Mrs. Sarganis as far as teachers putting in the time and everyone should not go after people who are trying to help. She spoke about working with the School Committee.

Principals work hard and she understands the salaries they are paid. We have high performing schools; it is time to support the work that teachers do.

Bruce DiTraglia, Councilman, is against closing schools in the city. The City Council is working on co-pay of insurance and it will take time for this to happen. He wants it to come out beneficial to everyone. The people of Riverside and the City do not want schools closed. It will help if everyone looks further and works together like the energy in the room. The City and School Committee will work together not to close schools. He asked about fire codes putting 500 kids in another school.

Margaret Rock felt the size of the Middle School would be too large and would become a toxic environment like the one described in Woonsocket. She said there are other ways to save; special education tuitions have doubled and asked why are we sending that many students out.

Bob Cusack of the City Council talked about the Caruolo Act. He felt this meeting was a complete sham. 87% of the school budget is adult entitlements and 13% is for the kids. Every year a crisis is declared and this a cruel game and he thinks should stop. The source of the shortfall is always the same: salaries and benefits. Contract reform was voted on by 70% of the voters; the charter revision gives the City Council oversight to ratify all contracts. The School Department can

change the third party administrator or get Blue Cross to match bidders. Buy back can be eliminated, consolidation of services could be substantial. The unions should be asked for co-pays on prescription plans and they should co-pay like the police and fire departments. \$2.9 million would be a good start. He said the School Department and School Committee refuses to do what is in their power and the crisis scares kids and parents, all for lavish entitlements for adults. He asked that people not be fooled again.

Speaker: Asked how we can get the money for the buildings which are sold; Look at the past where schools were closed and we still have to pay to maintain them.

Speaker: Thinks everyone should co-pay.

Speaker: Student does not want Riverside Middle School and Martin Middle School combined.

Speaker: If the schools are combined, she will not be able to be in band; she asked that the school not be closed.

Speaker: We love our schools as they are.

Edna Snow: She asked that a study be conducted on the air quality at Martin; the full picture is needed before a vote for the safety of students.

Mr. DeVall, Principal of Martin Middle School said he is a graduate of Riverside Middle School and supports that school. This is hurting the kids; Martin is a high performing school and the two middle schools are of one community. The kids will be together at the high school as Townies and he asked that we don't have kids attacking each other and their schools. He invited all to visit Martin Middle School. We have two high performing Middle Schools and should keep it that way.

Speaker: Opposed to any closing of schools; kids do not need disruption every year. Buybacks need to be addressed at the negotiating table. Every year the same nonsense to keep bringing everyone to meetings to hear the same thing. If all available options are not on the table, the School Committee is not operating in good faith with the public. People are being held hostage by decisions that will take place in a few months. Problems should have been looked at sooner; contracts over three years; talked about his own budget. School Committee should be better prepared and communicate real numbers with everyone. Projections and "we will look into it do not suffice."

Speaker: Make a major decision in 16 days without looking at all the options; contracts take time; this worries parents that major decisions will be made.

Antone Gouveia said there are short and long term solutions; shut down Watters and Platt and turn over surplus property; could share money of sale of city block; taxable property on that block would help out for eternity; buy out Montessori lease and move administration there. All would be heroes and the kids would not be moving.

Mr. Cardoza said these are pathetic proposals; shame on the board; he moved here for schools and property values will go down and everyone will have a problem selling.

Lisa Anderson, Riverside, concerned with the information received; she keeps a budget; she asked that the School Committee not make a decision in 16 days that will alter children's lives.

Speaker: asked what is buyback and how much it is.

Mr. Faria said this School Committee is working very diligently on different facets with legislators, City Council, City Manager and collective bargaining units. Other proposals being worked on, but we are at the mercy of the unions and the legislators. We are looking at major cost savings. All have to band together to solve these issues. The School Committee is doing this very early in the budget process to make people aware of the circumstances. If no collective bargaining relief now, we need to start for 2008 negotiations. The City has to prepare for next major contract now. The community must stand strong.

Debbie Cook said everything gets dumped in Riverside.

A motion was made by Medeiros to adjourn at 10:30PM, seconded by Mr. Santos. Vote 5-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia A. Iannelli, Administrative Assistant

Eileen Lovett, Clerk of the Committee